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Turf Tips for the Homeowner: Grasses for Lawns in Michigan  
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# Turf Tips

for the homeowner

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## Grasses For Lawns in Michigan

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### Recommended Turfgrasses

The establishment of a satisfactory, permanent lawn requires the selection of adapted turfgrass species and cultivars. An inferior quality lawn or failure to establish a lawn will result if the grasses selected are not adapted to the environment, level of maintenance, or use. In Michigan only a few species of grass are suitable for a lawn. They include Kentucky bluegrass, fine-leaved fescue and perennial ryegrass.

**Kentucky bluegrass** is the most widely used turfgrass in Michigan. With proper management, it forms a long lasting lawn, and is an aggressive sod former. Bluegrass grows rapidly during cool, moist weather with slower growth during hot, dry weather. When rainfall is not adequate, watering is necessary to maintain high quality. All cultivars respond well to a mowing height of 1½ to 2½ inches.

Many cultivars of Kentucky bluegrass are available, and new selections are constantly being introduced. Cultivars may differ in color, disease resistance, vigor, and amount of care required for best performance. Unfortunately, no single cultivar provides ideal performance under every condition. Even disease resistance can change as new strains of diseases appear.

Bluegrass cultivars are often placed in one of two categories: (1) improved, or (2) common. Improved cultivars have greater disease resistance and vigor, and can provide a thick, beautiful lawn if well maintained. Common cultivars possess less disease resistance,



**Kentucky bluegrass is a popular choice for lawns in Michigan.**

and severe discoloration and thinning from leafspot diseases commonly occurs. However, common cultivars perform fairly well in utility lawns under low maintenance.

**Fine-leaved fescues** are cool season turfgrasses that are more tolerant of shade and infertile, droughty soils than Kentucky bluegrasses. The fine-leaved fescues are best adapted to dry, shady sites and will not tolerate wet, poorly drained soils. Compared to bluegrasses, fescues require minimal levels of management, including less fertilizer and water. Excessive fertilization or irrigation can cause a severe thinning of a fine-leaved fescue lawn. Leafspot diseases can also cause an extensive thinning of the lawn during mid-summer. For these reasons, fine-leaved fescues are seldom grown

alone, but are primarily used in mixtures with bluegrasses. Red fescue, chewings fescue and hard fescue are the three fine-leaved fescue species grown in Michigan. Red fescue is a sod former, while chewings fescue and hard fescue are bunch type grasses.

**Perennial ryegrasses** have an erect bunch type growth habit with rapid seed germination and establishment. Medium levels of fertility and well-drained soils are preferred. Both common and improved perennial ryegrasses are available. Common or unimproved types tend to be short-lived due to lack of winter hardiness. These common types also have a coarse appearance and a tough fibrous leaf with poor mowing quality. Improved cultivars developed for turf use have greater

winter hardiness and better mowing characteristics. Only these improved cultivars should be considered for a lawn where rapid cover and wear tolerance are required. Ryegrasses may be seeded in combination with bluegrasses to establish a lawn on sloping areas where erosion is a potential problem.

**Rough bluegrass** forms a light-green prostrate turf that is adapted to moist, shaded conditions. It is superior to Kentucky bluegrass in establishment vigor, but will not tolerate traffic or hot, dry conditions. It does not blend well with most turfgrasses due to its light green color. Rough bluegrass is not recommended except for wet, shaded sites where fine-leaved fescues will not persist.

## Turfgrasses Not Recommended

**Bentgrasses** form an extremely fine textured, dense, high quality

turf when managed correctly. However, good cultural practices are so expensive and time consuming that few homeowners are prepared to maintain a bentgrass lawn. The primary use of bentgrass is on golf course greens. When found in a home lawn, bentgrass is usually considered a weed. Bentgrass is not compatible with Kentucky bluegrass and should never be included in a lawn seed mixture.

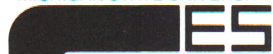
**Tall fescue** should not be confused with the fine-leaved fescues. It is a very coarse-textured, short-lived, perennial turfgrass species under Michigan growing conditions. Tall fescue has good tolerance to intense wear, heat stress, and drought. However, tall fescue is susceptible to snow mold and, when mowed frequently, is not sufficiently cold hardy to survive Michigan winters. The most common cultivars are Kentucky-31 and Alta. Both are quite similar in performance. Due to its coarse leaf texture and susceptibility to low temperature kill, tall fescue is

not well suited for home lawns in Michigan.

**Zoysiagrass** (or Japanese lawn grass) is a perennial, warm season turfgrass. Zoysiagrass turns straw colored with the first hard freeze in the fall and remains brown until early summer. It is established vegetatively by sprigs or plugs and generally requires two or more growing seasons for establishment. Meyer and Midwest are relatively winter hardy cultivars in southern Michigan. Emerald will winter-kill severely. Although Zoysiagrass is widely advertised, and is satisfactory for use in warmer climates, it is not recommended for use in Michigan lawns.

**Annual ryegrass** or Italian rye is an annual bunch-type grass. This grass winter-kills and its use in turf areas is not recommended. If rapid germination and quick cover are needed to prevent erosion, select one of the improved, turf type, perennial ryegrasses.

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